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Just a week after Metro introduced its downtown "trolley" -- buses wrapped to look like vintage trolleys -- U.S. Rep. William Lacy Clay, D-St. Louis, has announced that authentic trolleys could soon return to the Delmar Loop in University City.

"I have been pushing the Loop Trolley for almost 10 years because it will connect two great neighborhoods that I am proud to represent, the U. City Loop and Forest Park," said Clay in a press release. "This exciting new attraction will serve both visitors and local residents, while generating jobs and lots of fun."

Businessman Joe Edwards, who has long championed the idea of an old-fashioned trolley to connect the Loop to Forest Park, said the route could be up and running as soon as 2012.

The federal government is giving the project \$24.99 million in "urban circulator federal funding" as part of a public/private partnership to build a fixed-track trolley route linking the Loop with Forest Park. The funding is part of President Barack Obama's Livability Initiative. The partnership includes Citizens for Modern Transit and the nonprofit Loop Trolley Co.

"The selection is another major federal infrastructure investment that will benefit both the city of St. Louis and St. Louis County," Clay said in a press release.

According to Edwards, U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood announced the names of a handful of cities to receive urban circulator funding at a press conference this morning in New Orleans. An official announcement of the St. Louis project will be made at 10 a.m., Fri., at Blueberry Hill in the Loop.

U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, who is expected to attend the press conference, has long been an advocate for the funding, noting the strong impact the project will have on area businesses and economic development.

"The Loop trolley will connect the vibrant retail and entertainment of the Loop with the recreational and arts opportunities available in Forest Park," Carnahan said. "It's exactly the kind of project we need to continue revitalizing our economy, encouraging small business growth and economic development, and continuing to make St. Louis a great place to live."

Federal funding will cover only part of the \$44 million project. Additional money is coming from a transportation development district and a 1 percent sales tax in the Loop district. Backers are also raising funds from private individuals and companies that support the idea, Edwards said.

"This is huge news for St. Louis -- and the whole region, not just the Loop," Edwards (right), known as "the mayor of the Loop," said in an interview this morning. "This could be a prototype for other areas in St. Louis of how to connect neighborhoods to public transit and neighborhoods to each other." It will also be an added attraction to draw tourists to St. Louis, he said.

Fixed-track systems are "a great economic development tool" because people will invest in businesses along a mass transit route that they know will not change, Edwards said.

Edwards owns several businesses in the Loop, including Blueberry Hill, the Pageant Theatre, Pin Up Bowl and the Moonrise Hotel.

The Loop Trolley will run along a two-mile route from the Delmar Loop in University City to the Missouri History Museum at Lindell and DeBaliviere in St. Louis. The trolley will have nine stops and will connect the Delmar and Forest Park MetroLink stations.

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